

The David Story

Niall Lockhart

The David story is the most extensively narrated single story in the Hebrew Bible. In this close reading of the Masoretic Text of 1 and 2 Samuel the reader is brought face to face with an iconic, complex, and thoroughly human character, Jesse's youngest son. From David's rise through to the concluding movements of the drama this study shows how choices reveal character. Choices made by David at key moments in the story set him in contrast to his foil and predecessor, King Saul. In conclusion we will see how the tradition points beyond itself seeking dénouement in an anointed King like David and yet greater than him.

My father was a student of Professor McIvor's in, the then, Assemblies College in the early 1970s. In 1998 I was a soon-to-be theological student and my father introduced me to his old teacher. Although by then Professor Emeritus, Professor McIvor graciously offered to meet with me over a period of months for the purpose of preparatory study in biblical languages. Thus I found myself drawn in to the living tradition of Irish Presbyterian Ministers taught over many years by this universally respected scholar / pastor.

It was Professor McIvor who first pointed me behind the English text of Scriptures which had been familiar to me since childhood. It is thus with a sense of gratitude that I offer this close reading of the Davidic tradition, as it is found in 1 and 2 Samuel, in his honour.

Entering the Tradition

Few productions have, in perpetuity, so captured the religious imaginations of Israelite, Jewish and Christian audiences, as has the story of Jesse's youngest son. Few characters have proved more difficult to encapsulate in any coherent form.⁴²

⁴² Recent treatments of the Davidic tradition include: J. Randall Short, *Surprising Election and Confirmation of King David* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2010); Tod Linafelt, Claudia V. Camp and Timothy Beal, eds., *The Fate of King David: The Past and Present of a Biblical Icon* (London: T. & T. Clark Ltd, 2010).

The Davidic drama is the most extensively narrated single story in the entire Old Testament. As Keith Bodner notes ‘The sheer range of behaviour and variety of situations in the David story are impressive.’⁴³ Primarily that story is played out within the arena of the books of 1 and 2 Samuel. Samuel’s story-world is a colourful and variegated environment, inhabited by a diversity of characters, embracing the heights and depths of human emotions and experience.

As the curtain draws back on the books of Samuel, the audience is invited to enter an imaginative world. A scene of barrenness and despair, genealogy and love count for little in the face of Yahweh’s action in closing Hannah’s womb. Devoid of both hope and future a ‘hard spirited’⁴⁴ woman sits and weeps, enduring the taunts of a rival, and the witless sympathies of a husband and a priest.

It is in the desperate hope Yahweh will look at her misery and remember⁴⁵ that Hannah cries out for the longed-for male descendant. It is in Yahweh’s remembering⁴⁶ that this opening drama is brought to resolution, a resolution emphasised as Hannah keeps her vows and returns to the place of her weeping in thankful worship.

The poem that follows in chapter 2, echoed in David’s words in 2 Sam. 22:1 – 23:7, offers a reading strategy for 1 and 2 Samuel,⁴⁷ as both divine reversals and the institution of the monarchy are anticipated and celebrated.

⁴³ Keith Bodner, *David Observed* (Sheffield: Sheffield Phoenix Press, 2005), 1.

⁴⁴ קִשְׁת־רוּחַ 1 Sam. 1:15.

⁴⁵ וַיִּזְכְּרֵנִי 1 Sam. 1:11.

⁴⁶ וַיִּזְכְּרָהּ 1 Sam. 1:19.

⁴⁷ See Cook, *Hannah’s Desire, God’s Design: Early Interpretations of the Story of Hannah* (JSOTSup, 282; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1999), 33.

The subsequent Elide narrative sees Samuel elevated to the stature formerly enjoyed by the priesthood of Shiloh, establishing him as the arbiter of divine favour and the chief protagonist in the establishment of the monarchy.

The lineaments of the ensuing 'Ark Narrative'⁴⁸ have been the subject of much critical debate. The nature of the struggle within the narrative is somewhat clearer, as two competing peoples and incompatible deities are cast in mortal combat (1 Sam. 4-6). A struggle for *Lebensraum* between the Philistines and the Israelites, which will continue throughout 1 Samuel, is played out with the defeated God ultimately coming home in glory.

The Dynamics of Suspense

Meir Sternberg, writing on the dynamics of suspense in biblical narrative, notes 'In art as in life, suspense derives from incomplete knowledge about a conflict (or some other contingency) looming in the future ... we know enough to expect a struggle but not to predict its course.'⁴⁹

The opening chapters of 1 Samuel point forward to a divinely ordained liberating king. Simultaneously warnings are sounded in the mind of the reader concerning the fate of those who exercise power, and those who encounter the glory of Yahweh. The rhythms of this divine economy cannot be second-guessed. He plunges down and He

⁴⁸ Rost regarded chapters 4-6 with the possible addition of 2 Samuel 6 as representing an originally self contained 'Ark Narrative', see R.P. Gordon, *1 and 2 Samuel*, (Old Testament Guides, Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1993), 30.

⁴⁹ Sternberg, *The Poetics of Biblical Narrative*, (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1985), 264.

exalts,⁵⁰ He shatters His adversaries,⁵¹ and yet in like manner can also strike down fifty thousand of His own people.⁵²

A great blow from Yahweh can turn the joy of harvesters into the mourning of the bereaved. One question captures the moment; ‘Who is able to stand before this holy Yahweh God?’⁵³

Yahweh’s rescue is contingent upon the repentant acts, and the unswerving service of His people.⁵⁴ Yet with this announcement tension grows in chapter 7, as the theocratic and covenantal framework of the people’s hope collides with their request for a king. Rejected, Yahweh reluctantly acquiesces to their request. With both this intolerant God, and the uncompromising prophet nursing a grievance⁵⁵ it is at a most highly charged moment that Saul steps out upon the stage.

The Samuel story does not rush to David, and yet in its shaping we perceive a preparation for him, as the character of Saul, the prototype and antitype, is introduced and developed.⁵⁶ The coherence and artistry of 1 Sam. 8 to 2 Sam 1 is illustrated in Diana Edelman’s,

⁵⁰ 1 Sam. 2:7.

⁵¹ 1 Sam. 2:10.

⁵² The M.T. records that 50,070 men were killed (אֶלֶף אִישׁ) (שְׁבַעִים אִישׁ חֲמִשִּׁים) 1 Sam 6:19. The Revised Standard Version’s omission of ‘fifty thousand’, due to the awkward construction in the M.T. has been widely accepted. (See Gordon, *1 & 2 Samuel: A Comentary* (Exeter: The Paternoster Press, 1986), 103.

⁵³ 1 Sam. 6:20.

⁵⁴ 1 Sam. 7:3.

⁵⁵ D.M. Gunn, *The Fate of King Saul* (JSOTSup, 14; Sheffield: Almond Press, 1985), 61.

⁵⁶ K.L. Noll, *The Faces of David*, (JSOTSup, 242; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1997), 50.

*King Saul in the Historiography of Judah.*⁵⁷ Robert Alter puts it thus; 'The story of David ... cannot be separated from the story of the man he displaces.'⁵⁸

The Fated Sceptre?

While Wellhausen characterised 9:1 – 10:16 as reflecting a source favourable to the monarchy,⁵⁹ I suggest that with Hannah's poem directing our thoughts Saul's impressive entrance is ominous and threatening. While apparent providence brings Saul to the throne, and to the point of anointing, the flow of the narrative seems to favour Gunn's analysis that from the moment of Saul's anointing the future is loaded against him.⁶⁰ Even the proverbial words of 10:12 carry a certain ambiguity, enforced by the restatement in 10:19 that Saul finds himself playing out a role against a backdrop of Yahweh's rejection.⁶¹

Arguing that Saul is presented as acting in good faith in chapters 13 and 15, Gunn suggests that Samuel's instruction in 13:8 is ambiguous with regard to time.⁶² Likewise, in chapter 15 he contends that Saul is portrayed as acting in innocence, unaware that there was any significant incompatibility between destroying and sacrifice.⁶³

Whether Shakespeare did indeed pour over the account of Saul prior to the writing of *Macbeth* there is little denial that Saul is presented as 'the one great tragic hero of the Bible'.⁶⁴ Handsome, tall, and without equal among his peers, Saul's story unfolds as that of one

⁵⁷ Diana V. Edelman, *King Saul in the Historiography of Judah*, (JSOTSup, 121; Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1991).

⁵⁸ Alter, *The David Story* (New York, Norton, 2000), xix.

⁵⁹ Gordon, *1 & 2 Samuel*, (1993), 40.

⁶⁰ Gunn, *The Fate of King Saul*, 115.

⁶¹ מִן־הַיּוֹם 1 Sam. 10:19.

⁶² Gunn, *The Fate of King Saul*, 39.

⁶³ See Gunn, *The Fate of King Saul*, 49.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, 181.

destined continually to be ensnared. D.H. Lawrence located tragedy in the working out of a 'supreme struggle'.⁶⁵ Saul engages in a heroic struggle against fate – and yet underlying the narrative we perceive two further struggles.

The Intolerable Burden

The story of Saul is about kingship,⁶⁶ and the question of whether Yahweh will ever accept an earthly king. In the rejection of Saul we see resolution as Samuel declares Yahweh's intention to seek out a man after His own heart.⁶⁷ By 15:35 Saul as king is already dead' but monarchy is established. A second struggle however continues to loom over the text, the rigour of the old covenantal tradition broke Saul, mediated by Samuel's uncompromising stringency.

The tragic vision denies the very possibility of meaningful discourse.⁶⁸ Do the opening fifteen chapters of 1 Samuel therefore combine to simply present us with what Steiner conceived as 'the intolerable burden of God's presence'?⁶⁹ Cheryl Exum, commenting on the Saul narrative points a way forward when she writes 'As complete in itself, Saul's story is a tragedy; [however] in the ongoing narrative the central figure is David'.⁷⁰

Who would want to walk out upon such a troubled stage? The fallen are all around. Saul has failed the impossible test, and Yahweh's standards remain the same. Yet it is on this stage that the one to enter next will stand, or fall.

⁶⁵ Cited by Exum in Cheryl Exum, *Tragedy and Biblical Narrative*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 11.

⁶⁶ Gunn, *The Fate of King Saul*, 123.

⁶⁷ 1 Sam. 13: 14.

⁶⁸ Exum, *Tragedy and Biblical Narrative*, 6.

⁶⁹ Cited in Exum, *Tragedy and Biblical Narrative*, 6.

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, 15.

Seen by Yahweh

A hiddenness often underlies what is visible in Israel's life, and yet it rises to the surface in 16:1 where Yahweh tells Samuel He has *seen*⁷¹ for Himself a king from among Jesse's sons. In this unusual verbal choice Brueggemann identifies a conviction of the text that Yahweh's long term, life guaranteeing intentionality is at work in the story in decisive ways.⁷²

Samuel's arrival may have thrown Bethlehem into a flutter, and yet in 16:7 he helplessly stands oil-horn in hand before the procession of candidates, reminded that how he *sees* is not how Yahweh *sees*.⁷³ While the divine hand will become more subtle in the ensuing chapters, Alter notes that the writer (or redactor) 'felt that the initial election of David had to be entirely unambiguous'.⁷⁴ Samuel the sightless seer⁷⁵ is now surpassed by the one who Yahweh has seen.

If Samuel's passivity is in focus in the Bethlehem narrative David's inaction is similarly emphasized. The circumstances of David's anointing directly compare and contrast with that of his predecessor. In chapters 9-10 Yahweh led Saul to the place of anointing. In ch. 16 however David is completely passive, signaling the enormous shift that Yahweh has now taken it upon Himself to secure monarchial rule.⁷⁶

⁷¹ רָאִיתִי 1 Sam. 16:1.

⁷² W. Brueggemann, *Theology of the Old Testament, Testimony, Dispute, Advocacy* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1997), 353.

⁷³ Buber terms this style, governed by thematic key words, as *Leitwortstil*. Cited in R. Alter, *The Art of Biblical Narrative*, (New York: Basic Books, 1981), 148.

⁷⁴ Alter, *The David Story*, 95.

⁷⁵ See Sternberg, *The Poetics of Biblical Narrative*, 96,97 where he notes 'On the threshold of the monarchy, the outgoing prophet judge hardly appears in an attractive light.'

⁷⁶ Edelman, *King Saul in the Historiography of Israel*, 113.

In spite of his good looks David is introduced as a marginal person.⁷⁷ He must be sought out among the sheep, a metaphor for Yahweh's people.⁷⁸ The reader is never told what heart qualities qualify him for kingship.

The so-called 'History of David's Rise'⁷⁹ functions as a kind of *Bildungsroman*⁸⁰ tracing David's early career through to the point where he is settled as king in Jerusalem. Saul can do no right and David seems destined to be the winner, as the King unknowingly summons the one to his court who will ultimately displace him. David is irresistible, 'and Yahweh is with him'.⁸¹ As such the portrait of David at this point is somewhat two-dimensional, the characterisation simplistic and folkloristic in nature.⁸²

David – Opportunist and Conspirator

The Septuagint version of 1 Sam. 17-18 represents only 55 % of the Masoretic Text. Auld and Ho have argued that the M.T. (around which my research is based) represents a remaking of the L.X.X. with the express intention of contrasting the portrayal of David with that of Saul in 1 Sam. 9-10.⁸³

When anointed Saul hid in the baggage.⁸⁴ David plays out his 'royal testing'⁸⁵ on the field of battle against the Philistine champion. A

⁷⁷ יֶקֶטָן - the youngest, smallest (1 Sam. 16: 11).

⁷⁸ Edelman, *King Saul in the Historiography of Israel*, 113.

⁷⁹ This division owes much to Rost's 1926 study. Critics differ as to its limits (e.g. Weiser: 1 Sam. 16 – 2 Sam. 7, Klein: 1 Sam. 16:14 – 2 Sam. 5:10). For a fuller discussion on the delimitation of this unit see Gordon, *1 & 2 Samuel*, (1993), 61-63.

⁸⁰ A narrative tracing the development of a character (Gordon, *1 & 2 Samuel*, (1993), 61).

⁸¹ וַיִּהְיֶה עִמּוֹ – 1 Sam. 18:14.

⁸² See Noll, *The Faces of David*, 52.

⁸³ A.G. Auld and C.Y.S. Ho, 'The Making of David and Goliath,' *Journal for the Study of the Old Testament* 56: 19-39.

⁸⁴ 1 Sam. 10:22.

first stage in David's character development can be seen in 1 Sam. 18-22, a character that is marked not only by faith, but also by resolution and youthful ambition. As such Noll notes that even in this early stage of character positioning the narrator provides glimpses into the opaque person of David.⁸⁶ David is an opportunist⁸⁷ aware of possibilities for fame, fortune and reward (1 Sam. 17:20, 25-27). Yet this opportunism appears to be balanced (Alter suggests 'covered up'⁸⁸) by a patriotic commitment to the glory of Yahweh.

Conspiratorial undertones may be present in Jonathan and David's binding together in 1 Sam. 18:1,⁸⁹ undercurrents which Noll argues rise to the surface in the story of David's marriage to Michal. For Noll chapters 18-22 reveal a David who can be ruthlessly deceptive, and who will willingly manipulate those loyal to him. David delights in 1 Sam. 18:26 not that he has secured the hand of a woman who loves him, but rather that he has become the king's son-in-law. Michal will risk life and limb for her husband in 1 Sam. 19, and yet David's attitude to her appears utilitarian, dispassionate and politically motivated.⁹⁰

The Passive David

The careful balance of rhetoric in chapter 18 shifts the balance to a more passive portrayal of David.⁹¹ Love is bestowed upon him, by Jonathan (vv. 1, 3) by all Israel and Judah (v. 16) and by Michal (v.

⁸⁵ Halpern highlights this pattern of royal designation followed by a test-by-ordeal and then enthronement, cited in Noll, *The Faces of David*, 53.

⁸⁶ *Ibid.*, 52.

⁸⁷ See Preston, 'The Heroism of Saul: Patterns of Meaning in the Narrative of the Early Kingship.' *Journal for the Study of the Old Testament* 24: 39.

⁸⁸ Alter, *The David Story*, 105.

⁸⁹ McCarter notes Ackroyd's rendering of נִקְשָׁרָה to contain a conspiratorial emphasis. (See K. McCarter, *I Samuel, Anchor Bible* (Garden City: Doubleday, 1980), 305.

⁹⁰ C. Exum, *Plotted, Painted and Shot* (JSOTSup, 215; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press), 72.

⁹¹ See Brueggemann, *First and Second Samuel*, 140.

20). Thus understood the motif of 'success', woven throughout the chapter⁹² is seen as a consequence of Yahweh's presence (v. 28) rather than a result of David's guile.

The passive image of David continues to find sustenance in the events of chapter 19, where the one whom Yahweh is with, assumes the role of the hunted. David is acted upon, both by Saul's desire to have him put to death, and by Jonathan's delight in him. Jobling argues that Jonathan has assumed the role previously given to Michal, and later to be taken up by Abigail, namely to love David, and in so doing to witness to the inevitability of his rise.⁹³

David's passivity and Saul's activity, take their place against the background of Yahweh's resolve that David will be king. While David is the one to whom successful escape appears guaranteed, Saul is carried to a final mortal clash with Samuel in shame and frenzy. Saul's first ecstatic utterances among the prophets had marked his investment with kingship (1 Sam. 10:12), now delirium, and the doublet 'Is Saul, too, among the prophets?' frame his painful story. David is covered and protected, Saul is stripped and exposed.⁹⁴

Evolving Reversals

Reviewing the covenantal nature of the relationship between Jonathan and David, G.R. Clark has noted that although David's request for **חסד** is based upon an appeal to Jonathan's love, it is by nature a covenant that Yahweh will witness and honour; a **יְהוָה**:

⁹² **שכל** 1 Sam. 18: 5, 14, 15.

⁹³ D. Jobling, *1 Samuel. Berit Olam. Studies in Hebrew Narrative and Poetry* (Collegeville, Minnesota: The Liturgical Press, 1998), 162.

⁹⁴ Polzin makes this point contrasting Michal's use of a garment to cover David's bed (1 Sam. 19:13) while Saul is stripped of his clothes, and left to lie naked all day and night. (Cited in Alter, *The David Story*, 122).

בְּבִרְיִת.⁹⁵ While in the existing relationship David is the subordinate, the text anticipates a Divine reversal when he will be able to express his חֶסֶד to Jonathan.

In the present however David is on the run, and he runs to Nob, where there is a sanctuary and a priest. Before David can present his petition to Ahimelech he is asked a hard question, he answers with a lie. Deception at Nob, will be repeated at Gath. The narrative assumes a preoccupation with David's well being and success as all other concerns yield to this central drive. David's passivity and youthful naivete have given way to the characteristics of an infamous, feared and assertive outlaw. Everything must be appropriated in David's quest for survival – the holy bread, the sword of Goliath, even the role of the madman.

Forced into exile David entrusts his parents to the King of Moab, an ironic reversal of his earlier conspicuous dependence on Jesse. Saul's contemptuous reference to him by patronymic (1 Sam. 22:8) reflects his own failure to grasp the changing realities. The rise of David encompasses the ascent of the least, to the role of King, and in like fashion he has become the captain of the troubled, the indebted and the embittered.⁹⁶

Like the *'apiru* chief, common in the Amarna age, Greenberg and Mendenhall suggested that David and his men lived at this point as soldiers of fortune, surviving as mercenaries – defending cities such as Keliash⁹⁷ for a fee, and subsisting on the plunder.⁹⁸ McCarter draws

⁹⁵ See Clark, *The Word Hesed in the Hebrew Bible*, (JSOTSup, 157; Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1993), 127.

⁹⁶ 1 Sam. 22: 2.

⁹⁷ 1 Sam. 23: 1-13.

⁹⁸ Cited in K. McCarter, 'The Historical David,' *Interpretation* 40 no 2 (1986): 121.

on the testimony of Aziotawadda⁹⁹ the eighth century Neo-Hittite King, to suggest that David is depicted in 1 Sam. 19-23 as one 'representing a chronic annoyance or threat to established authorities.'¹⁰⁰

Comedy and Contrast

The images of David the conspirator and David the renegade must be considered in the context of Gordon's observation that in the closing chapters of 1 Samuel, 'in one vital respect David conducted himself impeccably on his way to the throne'.¹⁰¹

Attitudes to Yahweh's anointed¹⁰² take centre stage in complementary scenes in 1 Sam. 24 and 26. The dual effects of comedy and contrast combine to maximum effect in these chapters.¹⁰³ The vengeful Saul is juxtaposed with the magnanimous David. With three thousand of Israel's finest, Saul closes in on his prey, only to be impeded by the call of nature. Amazingly Saul is lead in complete vulnerability to the place where David and his men are safely hiding. With Saul 'covering his feet'¹⁰⁴ (a euphemism for defecation) David's hands are free to cut a piece from the royal robe.

Again in chapter 26, three thousand chosen men of Israel¹⁰⁵ set out with Saul – and yet once more he is found at David's mercy – his

⁹⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁰⁰ *Ibid.*

¹⁰¹ Gordon, *1 & 2 Samuel*, (1993), 63.

¹⁰² מְשִׁיחַ יְהוָה 1 Sam. 24:7, 11, 26:9, 11, 23.

¹⁰³ See A. Schulz 'Narrative Art in the Books of Samuel', in *Narrative and Novella in Samuel* ed. D.M. Gunn (JSOTSUP, 116; Sheffield: Almond Press), 147.

¹⁰⁴ לְהַסֵּךְ אֶת-רַגְלָיו 1 Sam. 24: 4.

¹⁰⁵ שְׁלֹשֶׁת-אַלְפִים אִישׁ בַּחֲרוּרֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל 1 Sam. 26:2, see also 1 Sam. 24:2.

vulnerability intensified this time by a deep sleep.¹⁰⁶ David is in control, the patient king-in-waiting.

Flawed Yet Favoured

The story of Nabal (a living incarnation of his name) in 1 Sam. 25 stands catalytically between the two accounts of David's refusal to end Saul's life. Socially and psychologically Nabal approximates to Saul, and so this allegory directs our reading of chapters 24 and 26.¹⁰⁷ The death of this fool thus functions as a 'type', foreshadowing the death of Saul himself.¹⁰⁸

While highlighting the inevitability of David's accession to the throne¹⁰⁹ the Nabal narrative also presents a precarious picture of David. In a way reminiscent of Saul's decline, David's actions at Carmel, brings to light hitherto unsuspected flaws in his personality. The syndrome of reason overruled by ego is not far from the surface as David bears down on Nabal, and with great haste sends for the wife of the deceased. Abigail's telling intervention reminds the reader that it is only Yahweh who is keeping David from relying on his own hand for deliverance, and from incurring bloodguilt.

Still fearing for his life¹¹⁰ David takes refuge with Achish King of Gath. Whether this episode is moralised or secularised, Alter argues that the horror of the story of national treachery testifies to its authenticity.¹¹¹ In David's alignment with Israel's traditional enemies, Eugene Peterson detects a focus neither on David's shoddy morals nor his clever genius (though both are present), but rather upon God's salvation.¹¹²

¹⁰⁶ וְשָׁם 1 Sam. 26: 7.

¹⁰⁷ Jobling, *1 Samuel*, 92.

¹⁰⁸ Gordon, *1 & 2 Samuel*, (1993), 65.

¹⁰⁹ 1 Sam. 25:28.

¹¹⁰ 1 Sam. 27:1.

¹¹¹ Alter, *The David Story*, 168.

¹¹² E.H. Peterson, *The Message of David*, (London: Marshall Pickering, 1997), 98.

The Motif of Knowledge

Throughout 1 Samuel women play a pivotal role. Similarly the stories of Saul and David interlock antithetically on the theme of knowledge. The final woman on stage acts with an abyssal stature that leads Jobling to suggest that she rank alongside Hannah in significance.¹¹³

Samuel is dead.¹¹⁴ For one last time Saul is excluded from the divine knowledge that he desperately seeks.¹¹⁵ Saul has little success throughout the story with oracles and divination. David however, throughout 1 Samuel has displayed a prudent and agile resourcefulness, which has presented him as one to whom the appropriate course of action has always been revealed. Saul's encounter with the medium at Endor and the chilling face to face with Samuel sees the doomed King being beckoned along with his sons to the underworld. As Yahweh promised, the Kingdom has been taken from Saul and given to David.¹¹⁶ Saul will pay dearly for his earlier disobedience.

Once again the hand of apparent fortune rests upon David in chapter 29 as his rejection by the Philistine overlords leaves hanging the tantalising question of whether David would have gone out in battle against his own people.

Valiant Death – Tragic End

Chapter 30 locates David far from the Valley of Jezreel as Saul's end draws near. Like Saul before him David finds himself in 'dire straits'¹¹⁷ and yet when he calls to Yahweh he is answered,

¹¹³ Jobling, *1 Samuel*, 185.

¹¹⁴ 1 Sam. 25:1, 28:3.

¹¹⁵ 1 Sam. 1:6.

¹¹⁶ 1 Sam. 28:17.

¹¹⁷ וְהִתְעַרַּב 1 Sam. 30:6, see also 1 Sam. 28:15.

strengthened and sent on his way.¹¹⁸ Chapter 30 concludes with David generous, victorious and thankful for Yahweh's provision.

Opening with an unusual use of the participle form of the verb,¹¹⁹ the final chapter of 1 Samuel reconnects the reader with earlier events. The Saul story ends with decapitation, the fate of Goliath. Yahweh sees to the heart, and so in this final chapter Israel's first king lies exposed and laid bare, the final divestment. The manner of his death has encapsulated his life, valiant, tragic and driven by events and agents beyond him. With the inhabitants of Jabesh Gilead the reader mourns his passing.

Samuel, Saul, and their sons are dead. One central character remains, and it is the question of his character development that will propel the plot forward into Samuel's second book.

Entering 2 Samuel - A Programme for Lament

With the announcement that Saul and his sons are dead, the canonical division of the Samuel text marks a significant moment of transition regarding the place of David within the overall narrative. Critical scholarship is however almost unanimous in its assessment that the first four chapters of 2 Samuel are a continuation of the literary unit beginning in 1 Samuel 16.

David confounds the Amalekite's expectations on hearing of Saul's death. The unwelcome herald is put to death, and the crime of acting against Yahweh's anointed emphasised and put in focus.¹²⁰

Word plays, fixed parallels and assonances combine in the lament that follows, to give an aesthetic satisfaction. Yet in the light of the word plays in the lament it is noted that David made no use of the

¹¹⁸ 1 Sam. 30: 7-8.

¹¹⁹ נִלְחָמִים 1 Sam. 31:1.

¹²⁰ 2 Sam. 1:16.

derivation of Jonathan's name in the course of the poem, and as such there is no mention of *Yahweh* or what he has *given*.

The secular nature of this lament thus stands in sharp contrast to the celebration of *Yahweh*'s provision in Hannah's prayer in 1 Samuel. The additional possibility that 'Saul and Jonathan' (v. 23) are paralleled with 'Judah' and 'Israel' (vv. 18-19) raises ominous questions of whether this *lament* will, both as form and content, assume a programmatic role in the unfolding of the narrative.

Realpolitik – Man of Action

The scene shifts abruptly to the political realities that David must face. There is no King. David consults *Yahweh*,¹²¹ and makes his move. In contrast to David's anointing by Samuel¹²² this anointing is secular, and public. The men of Judah anoint David, and yet in the North Ish-bosheth ('man of shame') is set up in opposition to him. David's throne and his fate appear uncertain as Ish-bosheth's protector Abner shows himself to be a fearsome and vicious warrior. The ensuing Abner-Joab conflict points to a pattern of violence that appears to be unbreakable.

With David growing stronger, and the house of Saul becoming weaker, David finds a new ally in Abner. His requirement that Michal is restored to him, results in both political advantage and the decimation of her weeping husband. Again the spectre of Paltiel ('*Yahweh* delivers') weeping as a result of David's demands, carried out by Ishbosheth ('man of shame') raises uncertainties about the propriety of David's actions.

In 2 Sam. 3:35-39 Noll sees the narrator highlighting the outward, crowd-pleasing effect of David's actions.¹²³ As Polzin notes, the

¹²¹ 2 Sam. 2:1.

¹²² 1 Sam. 16:13.

¹²³ Noll, *The Faces of David*, 57.

emphasis is on David's actions,¹²⁴ rather than on his heart, and his apparent incompetence in the face of the brutish Joab.

A multiplicity of comings and goings in 2 Sam. 3 testify to a moment of transition in David's fortunes, as the long running conflict between the house of David and the house of Saul appears to draw to an end – and yet as Abner is cut down, David is once more found in sorrow and lament. Yet while dissociating himself from Abner's murder he nevertheless retains the services of Joab and Abishai.

David's Innocence, Israel's King

Immersed in murder and intrigue, the narrative continues to work hard to establish David's credentials as a man innocent of bloodguilt. The killings in these early chapters of 2 Samuel, though necessary for David's rise are not welcomed by him. Brueggemann notes how three killings (of Saul, Abner and Ishbosheth) are countered by the deaths of the Amalekite, Asahel and the sons of Rimmon, in a convincing narrative strategy which asserts David's innocence.¹²⁵ David's innocence is set alongside the assertion that he is a man of covenant faithfulness, in his mercy shown to Mephibosheth, the son of Jonathan.

2 Samuel 5:1-10 caps off the amazing story of the rise of Jesse's younger son. All the tribes of Israel¹²⁶ come and proclaim him their king. The inclusion of the second person pronoun puts added emphasis on the fact that David is the one who has been chosen. Now he is anointed King over Israel.

This narrative sequence concludes with the summary of verses 9 and 10. David is secure and established, and Yahweh God of Hosts is with him. This has been the secret of his meteoric rise. Yahweh is bursting through David's enemies,¹²⁷ David is seeking Yahweh's

¹²⁴ Cited in Noll, *The Faces of David*, 57.

¹²⁵ Brueggemann, *First and Second Samuel*, 233.

¹²⁶ 2 Sam. 5:1.

¹²⁷ 2 Sam. 5:20.

voice,¹²⁸ and in doing as Yahweh commands he is experiencing unparalleled success.¹²⁹ The Samuel narrative began with the disgrace of Israel. Thirty thousand had fallen when the Ark had been captured by the Philistines.¹³⁰ Now David oversees a stunning reversal, as thirty thousand men are marshalled to restore the Ark of God.¹³¹

As the sounds of lyres, tambourines, castanets, and laughing fill the air, the joyous scene is shattered. Uzzah reaches out his hand to steady the Ark, and is struck down by Yahweh. 'Strength' (Uzzah) is suddenly cut down by Yahweh's wrath. The warning sounded in the text is both familiar and salutary, as a deathly silence envelops the celebrations. David is incensed, and David is afraid. Three months later, David is back with the Ark of Blessing, playing the role of both priest and king.¹³²

Sanctioned by Michal for his indignity, Ken Stone argues that the narrator sides with David in suggesting that he has done no wrong.¹³³ However given the seminal intervention of women in the Samuel dialogue, it is at least worth noting the import of Michel's sarcastic rebuke. At very least her words testify that uncontrolled action may lead to dishonour. The scene ends on an ominous note, with David boasting that he has no fear of future humiliation, while the final twist returns the reader to themes of barrenness, this time apparently without resolve.¹³⁴

A Formative Moment

¹²⁸ 2 Sam. 5:19,23.

¹²⁹ 2 Sam. 5:25.

¹³⁰ 1 Sam. 4:10.

¹³¹ 2 Sam. 6:1-3.

¹³² 2 Sam. 6:15.

¹³³ K. Stone, *Sex, Sex, Honor, and Power in the Deuteronomistic History*, (JSOTSup, 234; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1996), 140.

¹³⁴ 2 Sam. 6:23.

Chapter 7 of 2 Samuel serves as ‘a major cesura [*sic*] in the David story’.¹³⁵ A long pause in the narrative structure is marked by ideological reflections on the future. It will not be long before David must deal once again with external enemies and then be engulfed by internecine strife in his court.

Combed extensively for Deuteronomistic ideology,¹³⁶ the text of 2 Samuel 7 has for many years been a site of struggle within Old Testament studies. ‘Integrationists’ and ‘segregationists’ have divided over its place within the Jewish covenantal tradition,¹³⁷ whilst diachronic readers have parted ways with synchronic interpreters over how the text should be handled and understood.¹³⁸

The central theological role however of 2 Sam. 7 within the Samuel corpus¹³⁹ is borne out by the deliberate structural separation that is effected by it in the flow of the larger narrative. Everything that precedes the embedding of throne and Ark in Jerusalem is thus divided from all that follows.

2 Sam. 7 presents the reader with three voices (four if the reticent narratorial voice be included). It is rare for God to engage in lengthy rhetorical exchange with a biblical character,¹⁴⁰ and so this is a conspicuous feature of this episode. David’s proposals to build a house for the Ark are clearly troublesome for Yahweh, Nathan has

¹³⁵ Alter, *The David Story*, 231.

¹³⁶ This issue will be developed in chapter 4.

¹³⁷ Levenson has catalogued the central role that these two approaches have occupied in twentieth century research, cited in Lyle Eslinger, *House of God or House of David. The Rhetoric of 2 Samuel 7*. (JSOTSup, 164; Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1994), 1.

¹³⁸ Waltke, (cited in Eslinger, *House of God or House of David*, 1) demonstrates a synchronic reading, while Veijola (cited in Gordon, *1 & 2 Samuel*, (1986), 327) represents a diachronic approach.

¹³⁹ A.A. Anderson states that ‘2 Sam. 7 is, without doubt, the theological highlight of the Books of Samuel if not of the Deuteronomistic History as a whole.’ Cited in Eslinger, *House of God or House of David*, 1.

¹⁴⁰ Eslinger, *House of God or House of David*, 10.

misread the situation in assuming that David can do whatever is in his heart since Yahweh is with him.¹⁴¹

Yahweh's presence cannot be taken as licence; His glory epitomised by the Ark cannot readily be contained. Yahweh however goes on to evince His extraordinary commitment to David. Both in Nathan's prophecy and in David's prayer the double meaning of 'house'¹⁴² is exploited. David will not build Yahweh a house, but Yahweh will build David one, an enduring dynasty. David's house will be the persistent recipient of Yahweh's **כְּסֵף**,¹⁴³ the covenant he will benefit from promissory and assured. Throughout David's passivity and Yahweh's activity are emphasized, and David, Yahweh's servant¹⁴⁴ responds in thanks and humble praise.

Every story implies a community¹⁴⁵ and 2 Samuel 7 places the persona of David within the wider context of the story of David's 'house'. The David story finds meaning not in tales recalled about an individual, but rather in a narrative of an individual whose story draws us beyond the lineaments of one man's destiny and experience.

A Time of Complication

So it is not surprising that as the plot retreats from the highpoint of 2 Sam. 7 it moves to an encounter with David in an extended narrative sequence that focuses on the issue of who would succeed him. The precise boundaries of this 'Succession Narrative'¹⁴⁶ are searched for

¹⁴¹ 2 Sam. 7:4.

¹⁴² **בַּיִת** 2 Sam. 7:2, also vv. 1, 6,8,11,13,16,18,19,25,26,27,29.

¹⁴³ 2 Sam. 7:15.

¹⁴⁴ **עַבְדִּי** 2 Sam. 7:5,19,20,21,27,28,29.

¹⁴⁵ D.T. Taylor, *The Healing Power of Stories*, (New York: Doubleday, 1996), 114.

¹⁴⁶ See R. Bailey, *David in Love and War. The Pursuit of Power in 2 Samuel 10-12*. (JSOTSup, 75; Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1990), 34 ff., where doubt is cast upon Rost's theory of a coherent Throne Succession narrative,

only with similar elusiveness to those of the Ark Narrative and the History of David's rise.¹⁴⁷

Stories have beginnings, middles and ends. Diagramming narrative development Daniel Taylor speaks of the middle as 'the time of complication', as 'all the potential conflicts incipient in the givens of beginning make themselves felt.'¹⁴⁸ As the David story moves decisively into its 'middle phase' it becomes clear that the central scenes are connected to the beginning and end, not so much by chronology¹⁴⁹ but rather thematically by the revealing and forming of the *character* of David.

The essence of plot is characters choosing,¹⁵⁰ and after a summary of David's conquests, and further acknowledgement of Yahweh's sponsorship of him¹⁵¹ the story moves into 2 Sam. 9 expectant of how David will live out *his* chosenness. An anxiety persists however in the mind of the reader that David is now both high and mighty, and in Yahweh's economy that can be a precarious place.¹⁵²

With David's house established and Yahweh's דָּבָר assured, 2 Sam. 9 by threefold repetition focuses on David's promise of דָּבָר to the surviving Saulides. With land restored and promises kept, דָּבָר

with particular emphasis being placed upon a challenge to the pre-history of 2 Sam. 10-12, and an exploration of their role within the Deuteronomistic schema.

¹⁴⁷ For further discussion see Gordon, *1 & 2 Samuel*, (1993), 81.

¹⁴⁸ Taylor, *The Healing Power of Stories*, 63.

¹⁴⁹ Note the vague temporal reference of 2 Sam. 8:1 ('Now it happened thereafter') reflecting the achronological arrangement of the narrative material at this point.

¹⁵⁰ Taylor, *The Healing Power of Stories*, 64.

¹⁵¹ 2 Sam. 8:6.

¹⁵² 1 Sam. 2:3.

takes on the characteristics of a *Leitwort* enunciating what David claims to be a central principle of his reign.¹⁵³

Presented as a man of **דָּבָר** within Israel in chapter 9, David is now presented as one willing to exercise **דָּבָר** outside of Israel. To those who prove to be his enemies however David is ruthless, and to be feared. Polzin makes the point as he notes how the narrative dynamic of mitosis is used within this chapter to demonstrate how whole objects were taken (beards, clothing, anti-Israelite forces and Israelite troops) and divided suddenly in two.¹⁵⁴

In seeking to delineate the David character, Kenneth Gros Louis has argued that the entire David story explores the tensions between the private and public David.¹⁵⁵ David's private desires in 2 Sam. 11 undoubtedly provide a shocking contrast to the earlier picture of the king intent on ruling on the basis of kindness and mercy.

Within a certain semiotics of bravery, David at home (2 Sam. 11:1) as all Israel ravage the Ammonites,¹⁵⁶ falls under immediate suspicion of weakness and cowardice. Though some commentators have suggested that David was seduced by Bathsheba¹⁵⁷ it is contended that the text emphasizes Bathsheba as object and David as

¹⁵³ The word **דָּבָר** occurs seven times in the succeeding chapters (2 Sam. 9:1,3,7; 10:2 (twice); 15:20; 16:17). See L. Perdue, 'Is There Anyone Left in the House of Saul ...?' Ambiguity and the Characterization of David in the Succession Narrative.' *Journal for the Study of the Old Testament* 30: (1984), 83.

¹⁵⁴ Cited in Alter, *The David Story*, 246.

¹⁵⁵ See K.R.R. Gros, 'The Difficulty of Ruling Well: King David of Israel.' *Semeia* 8: (1977), 15-33.

¹⁵⁶ 2 Sam. 11:1.

¹⁵⁷ See for example Hertzberg and Bailey, cited in Stone, *Sex, Honor and Power in the Deuteronomistic History*, 97.

subject.¹⁵⁸ David's immediate response to the news that Bathsheba is pregnant is to employ the services of the vicious Joab, and send for Uriah (whose name **אֲוִרְיָה** means 'Yahweh is my light').

In Stone's words, Uriah 'highlights the characteristics which David should, but does not, display'.¹⁵⁹ His motives echo earlier sights of David at his best. He cannot countenance being in his house when the Ark is without a home.¹⁶⁰ He refuses to lie with his wife while his comrades are engaged in battle.¹⁶¹

Uriah exemplifies what it is to have Yahweh as your light, David cruelly and dispassionately extinguishes that light. Bathsheba (whose name **בַּת־שֶׁבַע** means 'daughter of an oath') is violated. David has done evil in the eyes of Yahweh.¹⁶²

Throughout the Bathsheba narrative David has been sending,¹⁶³ David has been active. The opening word of chapter 12 proclaims a stirring re-orientation; now Yahweh 'sends'¹⁶⁴ in the person of Nathan.

The Lifting of the Veil

'Stories', Taylor suggests, 'help us see how choices and events are tied together, why things are and how things could be'.¹⁶⁵ Nathan tells David a story, dramatically demonstrating how his choices and his future are inextricably and irreversibly linked. The imperfect

¹⁵⁸ For a recent treatment of this episode see: J. D'Ror Chankin-Gould et. al. 'The Sanctified 'Adulteress' and her Circumstantial Clause: Bathsheba's Bath and Self-Consecration in 2 Samuel 11', *Journal for the Study of the Old Testament*, vol: 32:3 (2008), 339-52.

¹⁵⁹ Stone, *Sex, Honor and Power in the Deuteronomistic History*, 101.

¹⁶⁰ Compare 2 Sam. 11:11 with 2 Sam. 7:2.

¹⁶¹ Compare 2 Sam. 11:11 with 1 Sam. 21: 6.

¹⁶² 2 Sam. 11:27.

¹⁶³ **וַיִּשְׁלַח** 2 Sam. 11 vv. 2,3,4,5,6,14,27.

¹⁶⁴ **וַיִּשְׁלַח** 2 Sam. 12:1.

¹⁶⁵ Taylor, *The Healing Power of Stories*, 2.

verbs in 2 Sam. 12:3 point to expressions of warm, love, safety and intimate affection between the poor man and his lamb.¹⁶⁶ In responding to the egoism and cold heart of the rich man David explodes with indignation and judgement.¹⁶⁷ Fokkelman sees in this outburst ‘David’s indivisible life energy’,¹⁶⁸ the force which murdered Uriah now ironically seeks justice for the poor man.

With two short syllables Nathan removes the veil.¹⁶⁹ Yahweh ‘gave’¹⁷⁰ and David’s response has been to ‘take’¹⁷¹ the little that was not his. Sanctimonious words to Joab come back to haunt him ‘the sword devours sometimes one way and sometimes another.’¹⁷² So at its inception the great founding dynasty of Judah is doomed to be a divided and troubled house.

David’s confession to the prophet parallels that of Saul in 1 Sam. 15:24 – ‘I have sinned’.¹⁷³ Saul asked for forgiveness and was refused.¹⁷⁴ David does not ask, and yet Nathan gives a way forward. This David is inherently unpredictable, as his response to the loss of his son demonstrates.¹⁷⁵ Hope springs as another son is born,

¹⁶⁶ וַיְחַיֶּה (v. 3 nurtured) וַתְּגַדֵּל (v. 3 raised) תֹאכַל (v. 3 would eat) וַתְּהַיֵּלֵךְ (v. 3 would drink) תִּשְׁכַּב (v. 3 would lie) (v. 3 was to him).

¹⁶⁷ 2 Sam. 12:5.

¹⁶⁸ Fokkelman, *Narrative Art and Poetry in the Books of Samuel. Vol. I*, 77.

¹⁶⁹ אַתָּה הָאִישׁ ‘you are the man’ (2 Sam. 10:7).

¹⁷⁰ Note the use of וַאֲתַנְּחֶה to describe Yahweh’s giving, twice in 2 Sam. 12:8.

¹⁷¹ לִקְחָהּ 2 Sam. 12:9.

¹⁷² 2 Sam. 11:25.

¹⁷³ חָטָאתִי (1 Sam. 15:24), חָטָאתִי (2 Sam. 12:13).

¹⁷⁴ 1 Sam. 15:25,26.

¹⁷⁵ 2 Sam. 12:20.

Solomon, his name speaking of peace,¹⁷⁶ and ‘Yahweh loved him’¹⁷⁷ – providing the forward movement and dynamic for the continuance of the story.

David’s compound sin of adultery and murder mark a decisive turning point in the career of this king who a few chapters earlier had scaled the dizzy height of unparalleled success. A decline is initiated, a descent into suffering that will only occasionally be relived by events in David’s favour. The catastrophic turn in David’s fortune is brought out in 2 Sam. 13, as tales of beauty, sexual sin and murder are re-visited on the royal house.

An Almost Tragic Decline

Absalom and Amnon, David’s sons occupy opposing poles, while Tamar their sister acts as the axis for their antipathy. The narrative, Bar-Efrat notes is shaped in such a way as to focus attention on the shame and incongruity of these events within a family setting.¹⁷⁸ Moreover Bar-Efrat suggests that the structural parallels with the David and Bathsheba episode emphasis that the foolishness¹⁷⁹ brought upon David’s house is in direct consequence of his violating Bathsheba. In an ironic twist the wisdom of David’s own nephew is turned against him, while his son Absalom¹⁸⁰ (‘my father is peace’) murders his own brother Amnon¹⁸¹ (‘faithful’). Themes of faithfulness and peace have been far from this domestic tale.

¹⁷⁶ שְׁלוֹמֹה – Hertzberg notes the implication of ‘peace’ (Hertzberg, *I and II Samuel*, 317) while McCarter agrees with Stamm and Gerleman that the name speaks of a replacement (McCarter, *II Samuel*, 303).

¹⁷⁷ 2 Sam. 12:25.

¹⁷⁸ Bar-Efrat notes for example the twin use of ‘sister’ and ‘brother’ in 2 Sam. 13:12. See Bar-Efrat, *Narrative Art in the Bible*, (JSOTSup, 17; Sheffield: Almond Press), 261.

¹⁷⁹ הַנְּבִלָה 2 Sam. 13:12.

¹⁸⁰ אֲבִשָׁלוֹם Absalom means ‘my father is peace’

¹⁸¹ אֲמֹנוֹן

With Absalom in self imposed exile Joab brings a Tekoite woman to Jerusalem¹⁸² and instructs her to tell what Larry Lyke describes as a ‘narrative *mashal*’.¹⁸³ A *mashal*, Lyke explains, has the benefit of providing perspective for the purpose of aiding interpretation of events in the narrative within which it is embedded.¹⁸⁴ Just as David has been pictured as mourning¹⁸⁵ so the Tekoite is introduced as a mourner,¹⁸⁶ setting herself up as the analogue to David’s compassionate side.

Her family similarly turns out to be equally analogous to his vengeful nature. David is torn between the honour of his two sons, a point brought out in the pathos of 2 Sam. 14:6. David can be associated with both the woman and her family as the story unfolds, and with the woman accepting the guilt¹⁸⁷ the implications for David are clear. However for the second time when faced with such a tale David fails to see the point.¹⁸⁸

In her ‘application’ the Tekoite warns David that he has plans which must be changed,¹⁸⁹ and accordingly Absalom is brought back, though David places him in a state of limbo. David’s desire for Absalom however is tempered by his own desire to cling on to the throne. Absalom’s beauty and vigour is a clear challenge to the ageing David. The narrator, though committed to David, highlights the flawless appearance of his striking son.¹⁹⁰ After two years of

¹⁸² 2 Sam. 14:1.

¹⁸³ Lyke, *King David and the Wise Woman of Tekoa*, (JSOTSup, 255; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1997), 11.

¹⁸⁴ *Ibid.*

¹⁸⁵ וַיִּתְאַבֵּל 2 Sam. 13:37.

¹⁸⁶ הִתְאַבְּלִי 2 Sam. 14:2.

¹⁸⁷ 2 Sam. 14:9.

¹⁸⁸ 2 Sam. 14:10.

¹⁸⁹ 2 Sam. 14:13.

¹⁹⁰ Brueggemann, *First and Second Samuel*, 296.

waiting Absalom is finally brought before David. At this point it appears the family divisions have been resolved. Tamar has been avenged, Amnon mourned, and Absalom restored.

Absalom however is to rise against his father. David's subsequent flight through the countryside is portrayed as being a penitential journey, with the language of 2 Sam. 15:23 and 15:30 being similar to that used in mourning rites.¹⁹¹ The weakness of David in his flight is emphasised, since penance is the preserve not of the powerful, but of the weak and self-abasing. Fleeing from Absalom, David is both. Wayne Booth argues that character is whatever *persists* in an individual, the habits of choice that shape who we essentially are when everything else is brought removed.¹⁹² At his point of deepest need (having heard of Ahithophel's support for Absalom) David cries out to Yahweh.¹⁹³

The Absalom complex (2 Sam. 13-19) rigorously exploits the tension between loyalty and treachery, devotion and deceit.¹⁹⁴ David's commission to Hushai demonstrates this point. Hushai's loyalty is exploited by his canny master, as David dispatches him back to Absalom and certain death.¹⁹⁵

Arriving at Bahurim David faces the indignity of being cursed by Shemei, and being told that the disaster that has befallen him is divine punishment for his bloody deeds to the house of Saul.¹⁹⁶ David, pious and submissive rejects Abishai's desire for revenge accepting Yahweh's rebuke.¹⁹⁷

¹⁹¹ Keys, *The Wages of Sin: A Reappraisal of the 'Succession Narrative'* (JSOTSup, 221; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1996), 147.

¹⁹² Cited in Taylor, *The Healing Power of Stories*, 42.

¹⁹³ 2 Sam. 15:31.

¹⁹⁴ Perdue, *Journal for the Study of the Old Testament* 30 (1984), 77.

¹⁹⁵ 2 Sam. 15:32-37.

¹⁹⁶ 2 Sam. 16:5-9.

¹⁹⁷ 2 Sam. 16:11.

Frequently using speeches and dialogues as the major catalyst for the sequences and movement of the plot, Leo Perdue contends that the narrator in the Succession Narrative consistently holds back from engaging in explicit evaluations of David's character.¹⁹⁸ As overt evaluations are withheld the reader is forced to scrutinise with great care the actions and statements of the characters. Such analysis, as David's dealings with Hushai and Shemai show, points at times in radically different directions.

An Emerging Character

Surveying the entire Succession Narrative Perdue contends that this portrayal of ambiguity in the character of David lies at the heart of the narrator's strategy. Rather than seeing David as a dynamic character changing within the unfolding plot (that entwines private and public catastrophes), Perdue suggests the reader is left with a 'double portrait'.¹⁹⁹ The valiant king ruling with compassion and forgiveness thus stands in continual juxtaposition to the deceitful, treacherous and ruthless survivor.

Absalom's public humiliation of his father, and assertion of royal power in lying with his concubine in public view, presses the battle for the throne towards a conclusion.²⁰⁰ Now there seems little prospect of reconciliation.

Aware that David is exhausted and vulnerable Ahithophel proposes to kill the king. Before responding to his plan Absalom ironically turns to the one who is against him (Hushai).²⁰¹ Hushai's advice actually forms a eulogy to David, spoken within the enemy camp, testifying to his bravery and guile. Hushai's alternative plan, that any town harbouring David should be hauled into the sea, appears

¹⁹⁸ Perdue, *Journal for the Study of the Old Testament* 30 (1984), 67-84.

¹⁹⁹ Perdue suggests this 'double portrait' may have reflected the ambiguity many Israelites held about the institution of monarchy. See Perdue, *Journal for the Study of the Old Testament* 30 (1984), 80.

²⁰⁰ 2 Sam. 16:22.

²⁰¹ 2 Sam. 17:5.

fanciful and protracted and yet it is the one embraced by Absalom. Hushai's advice is taken, Ahithophel's defeated, for 'Yahweh had ordained to frustrate Ahithophel's good counsel in order to bring bad upon Absalom'.²⁰²

As Brueggemann notes, 'God is utterly partisan to David. In spite of good advice, Absalom has never had a chance against David'.²⁰³ The woman at the well in Bahurim deceives David's pursuers in another move that points to the protective hand of Yahweh around David.²⁰⁴ All the details of the rebellion give way to the central testimony that Yahweh is still protecting David. Defeated by Yahweh Ahithophel dies a tragic death.²⁰⁵ As preparations for battle are made the narrative focuses on the preparations being made in David's camp. It is with David not Absalom that the narrative is ultimately concerned.

David's military success in the early verses of chapter 18²⁰⁶ belies the fact that it is against his own son that he is locked in combat.²⁰⁷ David dispatches his troops as a military strategist, but primarily as a father eager that his son should be spared. David's compassion for his son stands in contrast to Saul's frenzy when he had reason to question Jonathan's loyalty.²⁰⁸

As the forest and chance²⁰⁹ combine to entrap Absalom we are reminded that David's enemies are up against more than David. For four long verses Absalom hangs from the tree, his fate in the hands of those whom David has instructed to deal gently with him. David's

²⁰² 2 Sam. 17:14.

²⁰³ Brueggemann, *First and Second Samuel*, 313.

²⁰⁴ 2 Sam. 17:19.

²⁰⁵ 2 Sam. 17:23.

²⁰⁶ 2 Sam. 18:7.

²⁰⁷ 2 Sam. 18:5.

²⁰⁸ See 1 Sam. 20:30-33.

²⁰⁹ 2 Sam. 18:9.

desire to protect the one who is to him simply a lad,²¹⁰ is over-ruled by the brutal action of Joab.

David waits, anxious and anticipant – as once more the narrator prepares the audience to observe David as the recipient of news that while being politically advantageous to him will be received with much mourning.

The Loss of a Son

The use of two messengers and two messages discloses most vividly what occupies David's mind. The King's question 'Is it well with the lad',²¹¹ heightens the pathos, and as the Cushite attempts to moralise the outcome David's sole concern is for the welfare of the lad.²¹²

David's reaction to the death of Absalom is as violent as his acceptance of the death of his baby son's death was serene. As an expression of total loss, David's lament over Absalom like Lear's fivefold 'never' touches the core of tragic despair.²¹³ David's tragic conflict has been encapsulated in his impossible desire to keep Absalom from both the throne and harm. Political success has been marked by personal defeat. The picture is inverted and catastrophic. The people share in his grief,²¹⁴ whilst David so much in despair is incapable of showing regard for the soldiers who risked their lives for him.²¹⁵

Returning to Jerusalem David meets various people who he had encountered during his flight. These encounters point to further underlying elements of death and discord.²¹⁶ Shimei's re-emergence is sinister and unsettling, David's indecision when called to decide

²¹⁰ נֶעַר 2 Sam. 18:5.

²¹¹ 2 Sam. 18:29.

²¹² 2 Sam. 18:32.

²¹³ Exum, *Tragedy and Biblical Narrative*, 135.

²¹⁴ 2 Sam. 19: 2-3.

²¹⁵ 2 Sam. 19: 6-7.

²¹⁶ Conroy cited in Exum, *Tragedy and Biblical Narrative*, 136.

the issue of loyalty between Ziba and Mephibosheth suggests continued weakness, and his rejection by Barzillai points to David not being able to have things as he wants, having instead to settle for Chimham.

David's opportunism in 2 Sam. 19 saw him pit Northerners against Southerners, the result however was a second rebellion.²¹⁷ Suddenly the loyalty of the men of Israel²¹⁸ is seen to be fleeting and transitory, as they rally to the calls of the 'good for nothing'²¹⁹ Sheba. Sheba's words in 2 Sam. 20:1 are a strident challenge to the movement of the narrative that David and his house is Israel's rightful king. David is powerless to prevent the estrangement of Israel and Judah, in direct consequence of the blow dealt to him, and to his kingship by Absalom's *coup d'état*. It is only through the agency of Joab and 'the men of Joab'²²⁰ that the men of Judah regain their strength, subduing the rebellion and uniting the two groups. Jared Jackson believes that a picture of a weak and vacillating ruler, continually reliant on Joab, prone to anger but incapable of decision, is the dominant aspect of David's character that comes to the fore in the Succession Narrative.²²¹

Keys however suggests that this theme of 'David's weakness' is used by the writer to portray a character with whom it is easy to relate – a character presented in a very human way, with all his human weaknesses to the fore.²²² Thus understood this is a story not of the king to surpass all kings, but of the man who happens to be king.

²¹⁷ Noll, *The Faces of David*, 62.

²¹⁸ 2 Sam. 19:44.

²¹⁹ בְּלִיעַל 2 Sam. 19:1.

²²⁰ 2 Sam. 20:7 – Fokkelman notes that this is an unexpected designation, since David has dismissed Joab. Referring to the men as 'Joab's' shows where the real power lies, and where Abishia assumes it is. See Fokkelman, *Narrative Art and Poetry in the Books of Samuel. Vol. I* (1981), 325.

²²¹ See Jackson, 'David's Throne: Patterns in the Succession Story', *Canadian Journal of Theology* 11 (1965): 183-95.

²²² See Keys, *The Wages of Sin*, 142.

Keys suggests this supports her central contention that '[T]he narrative is interested solely in David.'²²³

Throughout the text, Keys notes, the theme of Yahweh's power is run in parallel with examples of David's weakness.²²⁴ Richard G. Smith in his recent work goes as far as suggesting that the focus of 2 Sam. 8:15-20:26 lies in showing how David and his house failed to establish justice and righteousness during David's reign over all Israel.²²⁵

David, presented as being strong assertive and opportunistic in the narratives preceding 2 Sam. 9, is recurrently painted in weakness in the succeeding episodes. Thus David's very survival is seen for what it is, a direct consequence of Yahweh's commitment to him.

An Escape From Chronicity – Falling into the Hand of Yahweh

Frank Kermode notes that 'in every plot there is an escape from chronicity',²²⁶ an escape from simply recalling 'one damn thing after another'.²²⁷ So it is noteworthy that the books of 1 and 2 Samuel conclude with four chapters which are clearly presented in an achronological fashion. Robert Gordon sees in these chapters (2 Sam. 21-24) 'a miscellany' ... 'an appendix' ... 'a fitting summary of David's reign.'²²⁸

It is my contention that in the 'escape from chronicity' that these chapters represent we have a carefully crafted conclusion to the plot

²²³ *Ibid.*

²²⁴ *Ibid.*, 148

²²⁵ See Richard G. Smith, *The Fate Of Justice And Righteousness During David's Reign: Narrative Ethics And Rereading The Court History According To 2 Samuel 8:15-20:26* (Library Of Hebrew Bible / Old Testament Studies: London: T&T Clark Ltd, 2010).

²²⁶ Kermode, *The Sense of an Ending. Studies in the Theory of Fiction* (New York: Oxford University Press), 50.

²²⁷ *Ibid.*, 47

²²⁸ Gordon, *1 & 2 Samuel*, (1993), 95

and character development that have been the central features of the Samuel text.

This point finds support in Alter's perception of significant links and compositional coherence, (*vis-à-vis* chapters 21-24 and the earlier narrative). Alter further argues for a structural unity *within* this 'coda', built around a chiasmic frame; 'a story of national calamity in which David intercedes; a list (chapter 21); a poem (chapter 22); a poem; a list (chapter 23); a story of a national calamity in which David intercedes (chapter 24).'²²⁹

Sternberg represents the chiasmic pattern that is used to 'round off Samuel' in the following manner;²³⁰

- a₁ Saul's sin against the Gibeonites and its collective punishment (2 Sam. 21:1-14)
 - b₁ David's heroes and their exploits (21:15-22)
 - c₁ David's psalm (22:1-51)
 - c₂ David's psalm (23:1-7)
 - b₂ David's heroes and their exploits (23:8-39)
- a₂ David's sin against the census taboo and its collective punishment (24:8-39)

This diagrammatic depiction of the literary device in use at the end of 2 Sam. is a useful aid to understanding the issues that are in focus, as the David story (as told by 1 and 2 Samuel) draws to its conclusion.

Chapter 21 begins with the assertion that there is blood guilt on account of Saul (due to his killing the Gibeonites). The result is a famine, a national calamity. The suffering is ongoing, 'year after year.'²³¹ Such sin requires atonement²³², and this is effected by David in his offering up of seven of Saul's sons. Mephibosheth is spared.

²²⁹ Alter, *The David Story*, 329.

²³⁰ Sternberg, *The Poetics of Biblical Narrative*, 40 (indentation mine).

²³¹ שָׁנָה אַחֲרֵי שָׁנָה 2 Sam. 21:1.

²³² 2 Sam. 21:3.

The account highlights a central ambiguity that has been present throughout the David story. Is David primarily a keeper of **סֶדֶק** (sparing Mephibosheth), or is he a ruthless opportunist (ridding himself of political rivals)?²³³

Saul's sin (a₁), and the virtual extermination of his house stands in contrast to the account of David's sin given in a₂ (2 Sam. 24:8-25). Chapter 24 begins with a portrayal of Yahweh as being arbitrary and vengeful, inciting David to sin, by taking a census. Assisted in his sin by Joab, David is immediately smitten with remorse as the last person is counted. The sin must be punished, the result will be a calamity, personal or national. In contrast to Saul and his house, David is allowed to choose his fate.

Daniel Taylor contends that '[T]he essence of plot is characters choosing. Like or not, story tells us we are free and therefore responsible. We may be failures but we are not robots.'²³⁴ It is argued that it is this dimension of 'choice' that sets David apart from Saul in the wider narrative. David, like Saul before him, sins in an apparently fated way. Like Saul David must suffer punishment. Unlike Saul however David is given a choice in how his wrongdoing will be atoned for.

Choices

Actions reveal character, and so do the choices that those actors make. David's actions in this story perhaps show him assuming the mantle of God himself, counting the people, acting in a way that disturbs even brutish Joab. David is presumptuous, and David abuses power to aggrandise his own position.

²³³ See Fokkelman, *Narrative Art and Poetry in the Books of Samuel*. Vol. III (Assen: Van Gorcum, 1990), 274.

²³⁴ Taylor, *The Healing Power of Stories*, 64.

David's choices in this episode however reveal another David. The David who asks only to be allowed to fall into the hands of Yahweh. The David whose hope is not in man, but in Yahweh's mercy.²³⁵

Even the mercy of this God is terrifying. Seventy thousand die in direct consequence of David's sin,²³⁶ yet mercy there is as the hand of Yahweh holds back from the destruction of Jerusalem.

Stories have beginnings, middles and ends. Taylor suggests that in narrative discourse '[T]he end is the final working out of all the latent potential of the beginning, and the consequences of choices in the middle.'²³⁷

The beginning of the David story, as told by the books of Samuel announced that Yahweh would bring new life through His anointed king. Choices made by David in the outworking of that story however left a stage scarred with sin, turmoil and untold suffering. Appropriately these themes merge in the final movements, with David buying the threshing floor of Araunah, the site of the future temple.²³⁸ There has been a lot of sin in the David story, and it must be atoned for. On the threshing floor David offers a sacrifice, and the final words record Yahweh's response, as His scourge is pulled back from the people.

The imaginative world of the David story has been a gripping drama throughout, a *tour de force* that has traced Israel's battle for survival, with tales of giants and generals, famous victories and narrow escapes. (See b₁ and b₂ (2 Sam. 21:15-22, 23: 8-39)). The character of David has been ambiguous throughout. Passive, and opportunistic. Merciful and ruthless. Faithful and unfaithful. Life-giving and murderous. Honest and deceitful.

²³⁵ 2 Sam. 24:14.

²³⁶ 2 Sam. 24:15.

²³⁷ Taylor, *The Healing Power of Stories*, 69.

²³⁸ Alter, *The David Story*, 357.

Taylor commenting on the ‘truth’ of narrative writes, ‘True does not mean factual (though it may mean factual),²³⁹ true means accurately reflecting human experience’.²⁴⁰

The David character as encountered in the text of 1 and 2 Samuel is thoroughly human, he is no airbrushed hero. The wonder that this story evokes is found in the central portion of the chiasm with which the books conclude. David’s psalm c_1 (22:1-51) begins with the stirring acclamation that Yahweh rescued David from the clutches of his enemies and from Saul²⁴¹. David’s psalm c_2 (23:1-7) concludes with words of praise that Yahweh has done חסד to His anointed, to David and his seed forever.²⁴² David was ‘better’ than Saul.²⁴³ Though in what way he was better the text remains silent. David does not show such diffidence as in he declares in exuberant praise;

Yahweh dealt with me according to my righteousness
I have been blameless before Him,
I have kept myself from sin.²⁴⁴

The reader cannot miss the stunning irony. How can this sinner claim he is free from sin? How can this bundle of inconsistencies claim that he has been righteous?

How can these contradictions be given voice? How can these reversals be celebrated and declared? Only from the lips of David.

Receiving the Tradition

²³⁹ I would argue that the Christian interpreter will want to defend the historicity of the David narrative, in light of the New Testament handling of the David story. (Consider for example Matthew 1:1, Acts 2:29).

²⁴⁰ Taylor, *The Healing Power of Stories*, 116

²⁴¹ 2 Sam. 22:1

²⁴² 2 Sam. 22:51.

²⁴³ 1 Sam. 15:28.

²⁴⁴ 2 Sam. 22:21, 24.

The complexity of the biblical character of David helps to account for his enduring popularity and diversity of portrayal in subsequent literature.²⁴⁵ In exposing a ‘central flaw’ in the make up of this man Yitzhak Berger points to an apparent lack of empathy between David and his subjects in the Bathsheba narrative in 2 Samuel 11.²⁴⁶

I believe that in what Joseph Lozovyy refers to as ‘the true-to-life’ portrayal of this very *human* character²⁴⁷ an empathy is actually created.²⁴⁸ An empathy between those who receive²⁴⁹ the Davidic text and David himself. David reads not simply as ‘narrative’ but as ‘meta-narrative’. In his story we find our story, he truly stands as our king, our representative, in what Jonathan Kirsch describes as his ‘rawness’ and his ‘earthiness’.²⁵⁰

Yet at his best, David whets our appetite for someone who can lead us to a new place and into a place of peace, security and wholeness in the presence of a God who cannot be played. Moments in David’s life set us on a trajectory to what a King after God’s own heart could truly do, but in David these hopes never find settled fulfilment. David’s story ends leaving the reader longing for something more.

²⁴⁵ The point is made by Steven L. McKenzie, *King David: A Biography* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), 2.

²⁴⁶ Yitzhak Berger, ‘Ruth and the David-Bathsheba Story: Allusions and Contrasts,’ *Journal for the Study of the Old Testament* vol: 33:4 (2009), 447.

²⁴⁷ Joseph Lozovyy, *Saul, Doeg, Nabal, and the “Son of Jesse”*. *Readings in 1 Samuel 16-25* (Library of Hebrew Bible / Old Testament Studies: New York: T&T Clark, 2009), 1.

²⁴⁸ Baruch Halpern describes David as ‘the first true individual, the first modern human.’ Baruch Halpern, *David’s Secret Demons* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2001), 6.

²⁴⁹ For further discussion on reception of the David story see William M. Schniedewind, *Society and the Promise to David* (New York, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999).

²⁵⁰ Jonathan Kirsch, *King David: The Real Life of the Man who Ruled Israel*, (New York: Ballantine Books, 2000).

How any biblical text is received depends upon the reading community within which one stands. Uriah Kim's recent 'Postcolonial Reading' of the David story serves as a helpful reminder that no-one can come to this text disinterested or without *a priori* commitments.²⁵¹ It is a welcome fact of postmodern biblical scholarship that the spectre of the neutral reader has all but disappeared. The biblical text ultimately leads any reader, hearer, or receiving community, to a place of choosing.

This essay has been written in honour of one such committed reader. Throughout his celebrated career Stanley McIvor served within *both* the academy *and* the Christian Church. The modelling of these dual commitments over a lifetime encourages the *Christian* reader to enter in to the Davidic tradition (and indeed any biblical text) with both mind and faith engaged. The committed disciple of Christ need not blush when with integrity and ardour they handle the Hebrew text.

Exiting 1 and 2 Samuel we long for a King, someone who will be both one of us, and somehow resolve the tension of how *we* can stand and live in the presence of a Holy God. *Fides quaerens intellectum* not only mines the Davidic tradition deeply but in turn it finds itself on a path that ultimately leads to the place of promised rest.²⁵²

Rev Niall Lockhart

²⁵¹ Uriah Y. Kim, *Identity and Loyalty in the David Story: A Postcolonial Reading* (Hebrew Bible Monographs, 22: Sheffield: Sheffield Phoenix Press, 2008).

²⁵² 2 Timothy 2: 8.